

Lewis and Clark County Courthouse  
Broadway  
Helena  
Lewis and Clark County  
Montana

HABS No, MT-27

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LEWIS AND CLARK COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. MT-27

ADDRESS: Broadway, between East Ewing, West Ewing,  
and Fifth Ave., Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Montana.

OWNER: Lewis and Clark County

OCCUPANT: County Offices

USE: Courthouse

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The impressive three story stone courthouse was built in 1885-87. It was situated on the brow of a hill, and the tall clock tower (now removed) was visible throughout the city of Helena.

In addition to the county offices, the building housed the offices of the Territorial Governor, the hall in which the Territorial Legislature convened, and the historical and Territorial Law libraires. News of the granting of statehood to the territory was received here in 1889, and the building served as the State Capitol until the turn of the century, when the present Montana Capitol Building was built.

The Norman Romanesque building was designed by the architectural firm of Hodgson, Wallingford and Stem of St. Paul, Minn. It was considered one of the largest and finest of its kind at the time of its opening. The building has withstood several earthquakes in the area, although the clock tower and a heavy stone cornice were removed after the devastating earthquakes of 1935.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The stone courthouse that once stood north of this building proved to be too small to handle the offices of the local government. Bonds in the amount

of \$150,000 were authorized. In April, 1885, the property on Broadway was condemned and the sum of \$9,000 was awarded to the owner of the land, a Mr. Ryan.

In June, 1885, the county commissioners accepted the plans of Hodgson, Wallingford and Stem of St. Paul, Minnesota, for the new Lewis and Clark County Courthouse. The \$150,000 in bonds were taken by the Merchants National Bank of Helena, the only bidders. The new courthouse was described as being of Norman Romanesque style, and would be constructed of Montana gray granite and dark red sandstone.

In August, 1885, the contract to build the courthouse was awarded to James Ryan and John Burton of Helena for \$137,999.50. They proceeded with construction of the foundations then sold the contract to Major J. J. Palmer of Indianapolis, Indiana, who began work in the spring of 1886.

In March, 1886, the stone cutters went on strike, asking that they be required to work only nine hours on Saturday, rather than the customary ten hours as on other working days. In May, 1886, the supervising architect, T. W. Welter of Helena, said that he hoped to have the building completed so that it could be occupied by the Legislative Assembly, due to meet in Helena in January, 1887. He was unduly optimistic, however, and it was not ready for use until June. The building was formally dedicated on July 5, 1887. The clock in the tower was illuminated for the first time on May 21, 1889.

The Helena Board of Trade Report for 1887 noted the completion of the building at a total cost of \$200,000 for building, grounds and furniture. Besides accommodating all the courts and offices of the county, rooms were rented to the Territory for use of the Governor, Secretary, Auditor, Treasurer, the Montana Library -- both law and miscellaneous, and the Historical Society. Legislative halls and committee and clerk rooms were also set apart, so that the building for all practical purposes served as the Territorial Capitol as well as the courthouse.

Joseph Kemp Toole, the Territorial Governor at the time Montana was admitted to the Union, became the first governor of the new State of Montana. The inauguration was held on the afternoon of Friday, November 8, 1889, about three hours after Montana was admitted to statehood. The ceremony took place in the southeast corner of the courthouse on the first floor, where the county assessor's office is now located. One of the new governor's first acts was to move the executive offices across the hall to the southwest corner of the building where there were two rooms, so that he could have a private office.

The building is still in use today as the Lewis and Clark County Courthouse. It appears much the same as it did when it was first constructed, except that the tall clock tower was removed for safety reasons after the earthquakes of 1935.

#### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND REFERENCES

- Campbell, William C., From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, Montana Record Publishing Co., Helena, 1951.
- Graff, James R., Historic Helena 1864-1964, Thurber Printing Co., Helena, 1964.
- Helena Board of Trade Reports, Helena, Montana Territory, 1887.
- Helena Weekly Herald, (newspaper), Helena, Montana, 1886, 1887.
- Leeson, M. A., History of Montana 1739-1885, Warner, Beers & Co., Chicago, 1885.
- Thresher, Frank L., History of the Early Settlement and the Helena of Today, publ. by author, Minneapolis, Minn., 1890.
- Quimby, Ed, County Assessor's Office, Lewis & Clark County, Helena, Montana; personal interview.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The three story stone building is constructed of gray granite quarried near Helena and is trimmed with red sandstone from Bayfield on Lake Superior. The tall clock tower, now removed, completed this impressive Norman Romanesque structure.

## EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - 132' in length and 80' wide.

Foundation - stone.

Wall Construction - bearing walls of native stone backed by brick and plastered on the interior.

Openings - Entrances: entry doorways set in arched masonry openings consist of two panel wood doors each having a light. Horizontal transom above of 2 lights. Doors are flanked by single light and wood panel.

Windows: wood double-hung 2/2 units.

Clock Tower - native granite, similar construction as the rest of the building; removed in 1935.

Roof - hipped, with a small gable on the north facade; originally slate-covered.

Chimneys - brick; now removed.

## INTERIOR

The original layout has been extensively altered to meet the changing needs of the county. State offices were moved into the state capitol building when it was built.

Floor Plan - The building contains three floors and a full basement. The basement has an outside doorway (on the north) and this area contains today storerooms, janitorial facilities, toilets, County Surveyor's office, Superintendent of Schools, boiler room, vaults, Justice of the Peace, Public Welfare Department, and at one time, the Board of Health.

The first floor houses the County Commissioners' offices, Auditor, Clerk and Records Office, vaults, Treasurer and Assessor. The original Governor's Office was in the southeast

corner, and later moved to the southwest corner where the Assessor's office is today. At one time the sheriff's office was also on this floor.

Today, the second floor contains the large office of District Court Dept. 1, a room 45' x 49', two stories in height with a balcony on three sides. It is located in the northwest corner. The District Court no. 2 room, 36' x 42', is located in the southwest corner. In addition, there are the two Judges Chambers, Court Reporters office, County Attorney's office, Probation Officer's room, Clerk of the Court and restrooms.

The third floor has several Jury Rooms for the District Courts, the balcony for the larger district court room, law library, jury quarters, and several rooms that, at various times, have served as W. P. A. office, sewing rooms and Girl Scout rooms.

Stairway - oak balustrade.

Floor - terrazzo on the main floor; concrete second floor lobby. Courtrooms and the remainder of the second and third floors are hardwood.

Wall and Ceiling Finish - exterior walls and bearing walls; plaster on soft brick. Ceiling: lath and plaster.

Doors - four-panel, transom above.

Trim - elaborately moulded pine.

Hardware - entry door hardware brass; others, cast iron.

Lighting - originally gas; now electric.

Heating - steam.

OTHER

General Setting - The building today occupies two city blocks from Broadway on the south to Fifth Street on the north and East Ewing and West Ewing on the other two sides. The building sits closer to Broadway, with parking taking up the equivalent of a block on the north end of the site.

Enclosures - low, native stone fence. The stones came from the original courthouse that was replaced by the present building.

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